De beweging van de geest

Meer, Matthieu Herman van der

Summary

Nicolaus Cusanus, also known as Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), is one of the most fascinating personalities of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance period. He played an important role in church politics, was involved in councils and had to deal with reform movements and schisms; but more important were his achievements as one of the most original and far-reaching theological and philosophical thinkers of his time.

For Cusanus, philosophy is by no means remote from everyday experience. Its exercise included every use of one's intellectual capacities, be it for acquiring knowledge and understanding of the material world, creating a work of art, or aiming to be successful in commerce. Hidden behind all these activities lies, according to Cusanus, the same quest for *unity* that leads to his own abstract philosophical and theological speculations.

Every intellectual activity starts with a notion of chaos and diversity and aims at order and structure. A painter arranges amorphous masses of paint into a portrait; a merchant searches among all possible transactions of goods and resources for those that provide him with the highest possible profit; a scientist aims at reducing the diversity of nature to the simplest possible laws, rules and structures. Every form of progress consists of increasing order and refining the understanding of general principles. The human mind (*mens, intellectus*) has the ability to achieve this progress.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to reach the ultimate goal, the state of absolute unity (*unitas absoluta*). This unity would imply that there is no difference between the one who knows and the known object, between the realm of perception and the realm of being. For Cusanus there will always be a distance between man's quest for unity and the unity itself. This unbridgeable gap does not simply exist as the result of a deficiency of the human mind; it is rather determined by a metaphysical necessity.

The human mind works by means of counting and measuring. As such it can only perceive that which can be counted and measured, that which is determinated by size or other measurable features. The absolute unity has no limits and no definitions; it is infinite. Therefore it is inaccessible to the human mind; it can never be properly understood or expressed in words. The

expression *unity* actually is therefore only an insufficient denotation. Parallel to this denotation Cusanus develops a whole range of other expressions that may just as well approach what is just described as *unity*: the absolute greatest (*maximum absolutum*), infinity (*infinitas*), wisdom (*sapientia*), truth (*veritas*) or the principle (*principium*) of all that exists, or simply God, the creator. All these expressions provide us with *some* understanding of what they describe, but none of them enables us to understand it completely.

The unbridgeable divide between human knowledge and its goal, that is infinite wisdom, finds its counterpart on the ontological level in the infinite distance between the creator and the world He created. For both the epistemological *and* the ontological levels Cusanus states at various points in his work that there can never be a proportional relation between the infinite and the finite. Therefore, the counting and measuring of the human mind will never give access to absolute truth or unity.

If this is true, one could conclude that that truth is a mere chimera. Cusanus claims that the opposite is the case. Although it is unreachable, absolute truth exists, and only because of that is any sort of – necessarily relative – knowledge possible. Without truth, skepticism is unthinkable. Therefore, even if man's pursuit of absolute knowledge never reaches its goal, this pursuit is anything but pointless, since it is the basic condition for acquiring *any* sort of knowledge, which is, as Cusanus maintains in imitation of Aristotle, never in vain.

Absolute truth exists; it is hidden and it partially manifests itself in any form of relative knowledge. Even though it is impossible to reach, it can be approached, and this succeeds the better, the more various and manifold the approaches are. For instance, when one discovers that a scientific formula of water *and* a poetic *and* a theological description relate to the same fluid substance as their unity, water is better understood than in each of these approaches individually. Cusanus himself shows such an approach by choosing many different perspectives in his search for God, to which the different names for God bear witness.

In the multitude of perspectives, something of the invisible and inexpressible truth is illuminated. For just as God expresses Himself in an uncountable manifold of created beings, the human mind, in reverse, gains access to God through this manifold. If we, for instance, would like to know

who Rembrandt really was, we could look at one of his self-portraits. Although each single self-portrait could be said to give an accurate representation of the Dutch master, it is in the series of self-portraits over the course of his life that we get to know the painter much better than through just one of them. Nobody was probably more aware of this fact than Rembrandt himself, attempting to unravel the mystery of being a human – and thus ultimately working on the same problem as Cusanus did.

The divine truth manifests itself in an uncountable number of finite objects, ideas, human beings, theories, conjectures but also in beauty. This uncountable number of manifestations gives man an uncountable number of options to search for God; it also ensures that this search will never come to an end. In attempting to understand nature, writing books, painting portraits, teaching children, designing household tools, inventing and playing games, etc., man has the opportunity to discover that his own creative power is an image of the spiritual power of the Creator. In exercising his intellectual powers within the world that surrounds him, man gains knowledge of God and of himself. Moving out of himself leads to moving into himself. This is a dialectical movement which Cusanus tries to understand with the notions of *complicatio* and *explicatio* as well as his famous notion of *coincidentia oppositorum.*

Most of Cusanus' writings circle in different ways around the problem of how to explain, to 'un-fold' (*ex-plicare*) the notion of God's incomprehensibility. Cusanus asks what it means that God on the one hand lives in us, but that, on the other hand, He can only be approached by focusing on objects outside ourselves. In his book *De ludo globi* ('The game of Spheres') Cusanus develops the image of a ball game. He depicts man as a wooden ball and man's pursuit of knowledge and unity as the toss towards a fixed point. The roundness of this ball represents a perfection that seemingly makes it easy to roll in the right direction. But this perfection is damaged by the ball's concavity on one side. Due to this concavity the ball cannot roll in a straight line. Every attempt to roll it leads inevitably to a circular movement. Just as this ball, the human mind is only able to circle around the truth but not to reach it directly. Unlike the ball, man needs no external impulse, but he can initiate his own movement.

The rolling of the wooden ball points to a central aspect of Cusanus' philosophy which –in my opinion – has been taken for granted too much while

in fact deserving a study of its own: the role of *movement* in Cusanus' speculations on approaching divine knowledge. Drawing from the rich tradition of Platonic philosophy, Cusanus calls human mind a 'substantial movement' (*motus substantialis*) and a 'self-moving movement' (*motus seipsum movens*). In so doing, he stresses the similarity between man and God. For man is able to order his world, to shape art, to count, to reflect on himself, to invent games. To no other creature are these abilities given. In this sense man is different from all creatures and is the image of God. The outward movement of the human mind imitates God's creative activity. On the other hand, however, movement is also related to the notion of progression towards the state of perfection and as such indicative of imperfection. According to Aristotle and his followers movement is a process of realization of the perfection of a being (*energeia*) from a state of potency (*dynamis*).

Therefore the question arises, how far the similarity between man and God reaches. Is the fact that the human mind is constantly in motion a symptom of its imperfection or is it an aspect which man has in common with God? If the latter is the case: in what sense should movement be taken? What kind of creature is man, since the almost infinite power to move its intellect is bestowed upon him? Being an *alter deus*, a second God, can he ever overcome the limits of his finiteness and become one with his infinite creator? These are the central questions discussed in this thesis.

I start my research with an exposition of Cusanus' notions of movement and circularity. (chapter 1). Ever since Parmenides, the sphere had been regarded as the perfect form. In medieval cosmology the universe was considered to be a perfect sphere, perpetually moving as the result of the eternal attraction by God, the 'unmoved mover'. After a short treatment of ideal form and ideal movement, I turn to Cusanus' reflections on the possibility of measuring movement in the imperfect sublunar world. A practical occasion initiated these reflections. During the years he spent at the Council of Basel (1431-1449) Cusanus was engaged in attempts to reform the Christian calendar. As a member of a commission for reform of the calendar he proposed a new system of counting and measuring time in order to adjust the calendar to the astronomical time. In a short treatise on this topic (*De correctione kalendarii*) he discusses the problems of measuring and movement. He states that it is impossible to exactly determine the courses of the celestial bodies since this de-

termination requires a fixed point, which does not exist. Everything is moving, even the earth, which in traditional cosmologies was regarded as the solid center of the universe. From the assumption that there is no fixed point from which movement can be measured Cusanus draws the conclusion that in fact nothing can be said with absolute certainty.

In his *magnum opus*, 'On Learned Ignorance' (*De docta ignorantia*, 1440) Cusanus transforms his initial thoughts into a philosophical principle (chapter 2). The absence of a point of reference is the reason why the human mind is not able to obtain certain knowledge. Man is entangled in the world he wants to know. He cannot step out of it in order to have an objective look. As there is no Archimedean point from which man can measure movement and hence learn about the world and God, how can he know that whatever we think is true, really *is* true? Cusanus replies that the ultimate truth exists within the world, but that it is not of the same nature as the finite beings. It is in everything as the essence of every being. It is also in every proposition as the very truth about which this proposition wants to express something. It moves man to search and as such accompanies every search that is undertaken. Yet truth and proposition are not identical and they will never be identical. No proposition will ever be able to express the infinite truth in all its dimensions. But thanks to the presence of truth in every proposition, it is certain that this proposition is related to the truth, be it as a close approximation, be it as a far removed, maybe even nonsensical contention (for to be nonsense, a contention should stand in relationship with what makes sense, the truth). With the word *conjecture* Nicholas of Cusa expresses the inevitability of the relatedness of every being to the infinite truth (or God) on the one hand and the infinite distance between the created beings and their essences on the other.

In chapter 3 I discuss the particular mode in which the human mind searches for God. Measuring and comparing are activities related to the *ratio*, which is according to Nicholas of Cusa the discursive faculty of the human mind. With his *ratio*, man establishes connections between finite objects. Its perception of the world is based on the premise that a statement cannot be true and false at the same moment ('principle of the excluded third' or 'principle of the excluded middle' – *tertium non datur*). However, the higher faculty of the human mind, the *intellectus*, enables man to relate the realm of finiteness to the realm of the infinity. The intellect sees unity among the contradictions that

necessarily occur when one tries to speculate about the infinite. For instance, if God is conceived as that which comprises all beings, he has to be thought of as infinitely large, whereas if he is conceived as something that permeates everything, he has to be considered infinitely small. The intellect is the faculty of the mind that sees the coincidence of the opposites like these (*coincidentia oppositorum*). It is a question, however, whether the coincidence is a mode of thinking of the intellect or a quality of God himself. In this chapter I discuss both Cusanus' ambiguity in this matter and the different opinions among Cusanus-scholars. In the final chapter I will return to this question while discussing the metaphor of 'the wall of Paradise' that refers to the coincidence of opposites. Cusanus uses this metaphor in his treatise *De visione dei* (1453). There he writes that man is able to see the wall, to recognize *rationally* that there is a coincidence of opposites, but he is not able to see Paradise hidden behind this wall. The only thing he can do is accepting the coincidence as a divine manifestation – which, however, will never allow him to understand who God really is.

Since God's infinity can never be made into a finite object to the human mind, man can only become aware of God as long as he searches for Him. His search cannot come to a rest, but continues to be in motion. The concept of movement of the mind does not only apply to the human mind, however, but also to God – on first sight an unusual supposition, which is discussed in the fourth chapter. Cusanus abandons the traditional static views of God as *actus purus* or the Unmoved Mover and produces in his work a series of names and depictions of God which stress movement as the most important characteristic of God (*possest* in *De possest, posse ipsum* in *De apice theoriae,* the spinning globe in *De ludo globi*, the creative look of the *eicona dei* in *De visione dei* and the splendor of the perfect mirror in *De filiatione dei*). The static concept of God forms a keystone for Cusanus' criticism of traditional scholastic theology. For him the notion of a perfect, static, immovable God conceals the true nature of the relationship between God and his creation. Cusanus supposes that this relationship is dynamic in both directions. Not only do the human mind and all of creation move towards God, but, conversely, God moves towards them as well. Cusanus identifies this relation or interaction with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who allows for the ultimate coincidence of the

'upward' movement of the finite world to God and of the 'downward' movement from God to the world.

His identification of the Holy Spirit with the movement of the divine mind opens access to another key problem of medieval philosophy: the Christian evaluation of the classical philosophical heritage, which for Cusanus formed a major source of inspiration. Cusanus states that Plato and Aristotle could have had access to the highest knowledge of learned ignorance if only they had known about the third person of the Trinity. Despite their intellectual sharpness they ultimately failed to reach wisdom, because they could not grasp the idea that God and the world are connected through the movement of the divine spirit. In the Holy Spirit the opposites of God's transcendence ("Father") and his immanence ("Son") coincide. The Holy Spirit is the force that unites God's outward movement as creator of the world with his inward movement of contemplation of Himself as well as the movement of the creation towards its creator.

The complexity of the dynamic relation between creator and creation is, according to many interpreters of Cusanus, in no name better expressed than in the name or formula 'The Not Other' (*non aliud*). As *non aliud*, God is a both perfectly identical with everything he created, and also entirely different from it. He is both the true nature of his creation and yet nothing like the finite beings. Since both transcendence and immanence are expressed in *non aliud*, this name is especially suitable to gain comprehension of God.

Having searched in the foregoing for the common characteristics in the respective movements of man and God, in the last two chapters I examine the fault line between them. I begin by focusing on the notion of self-movement of the human mind (chapter 5). Cusanus develops this notion against the background of Aristotle's criticism of such concepts. For Aristotle the soul is the living principle of the body. It actively moves the body but does not move itself. Cusanus argues that one can not have one without the other. The soul (or mind, *anima, mens*) cannot actively move something else without being moved itself. Therefore the soul *has to* be self moving; it has to be the origin of its own movement. In order to describe this, Cusanus develops the expressions 'living number' (*numerus vivus*) or 'substantial movement' (*motus substantialis*). *Numerus vivus* is a name that relates to the fact that according to Cusanus, the human mind is essentially rational and the origin of its own set of in-

struments, numbers and rational proportions. Being their origin and master (the reason why it is called a 'number' itself), the mind is free to decide how and when it uses its mathematical tools in order to acquire knowledge. Hence it is a free, self-moving and 'living number'.

But even if the human mind is capable of moving itself, it still cannot be regarded as an unlimited power, as an almighty potency (*potentia*). For it is dependent on the stimuli of the body and, more generally, on the extra-mental world in which it can exert its intellectual power. Were the mind to be absolutely self-moving, its movement would consist of the creation of being from nothing. This, however, is what God alone is able to do. The self-movement of the human mind can imitate this divine act by mapping its own conjectural world, but this act is infinitely far removed from God's. Both God and man have an unlimited creative potential, but God is able tp produce an unlimited creation; man's mind is only capable of unlimited comparisons.

In the last chapter (6) I return to the question about the goal of man's movement towards God. On the one hand, every striving should have an achievable end; on the other hand there is no proportional relation between the finite and the infinite. In Cusanus' philosophy this subject matter is directly related to the questions of the relationship between God and man in Jesus Christ and to the theme of the realization of man's son-ship (*filiatio*, *theosis*). Man is able to see God in the shape of Jesus Christ, but he is unable to become part of him. In his Christology, Cusanus develops the notion of the hypostatical union of God and man, in which both are inseparably united but in no sense mixed with each other. In accordance with ecclesiastical doctrine, Cusanus holds to the idea that Christ is one person in two natures (human and divine). This is the model on the basis of which Cusanus elaborates his theory of *filiatio*.

For Cusanus the highest form of unity with God, the state of eternal joy, consists of the simple awareness and acceptance of the incomprehensiveness of the infinite. Somebody who loves God, Cusanus states in his *Idiota de sapientia*, finds his happiness in the discovery that the beloved is infinitively lovable. This 'joyful incomprehension of the incomprehensiveness' means an unceasing movement in which man comes ever closer to God. His love will never find an end. This is the point at which man's finiteness appears to be a blessing. For it is thanks to his being a finite being that the state of loving God

shall never have an end. Thanks to the gift of the intellect the mind can move on to an ever higher understanding of the creator. One has to search for God from constantly new and changing points of view and for definitions of him that are as paradoxical as possible. Viewing this need for starting new searches time and again, we can understand the abundant literary production of Cusanus. The unbridgeable distance between man and creator does not make man small and unimportant but forms a stimulus for creativity. The breadth of Cusanus' oeuvre is a perfect example of this.